



The BOOTS

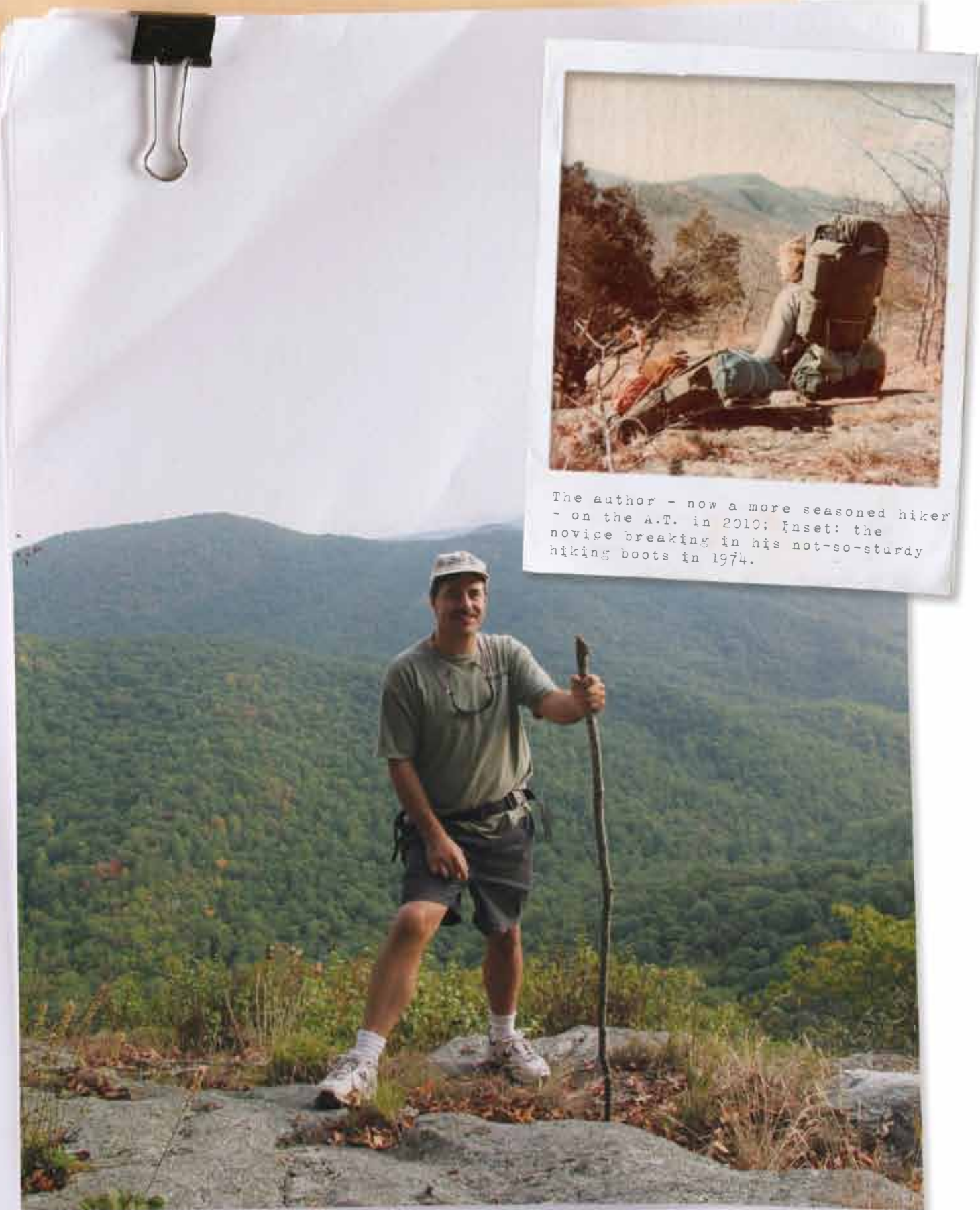
Gearing up for a planned thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail in the summer of 1975, my friend and Trail

partner Eric proposed that we do a preparatory hike over the Christmas holidays in the north Georgia mountains.

"You need to see what it is really like," he said. "Living in Florida, you just can't prepare because it's too flat." The hike was probably a good idea since I had never backpacked before. Eric, on the other hand, had been on one multi-day backpacking trip in the past, so by comparison, he was a pro. Then Eric asked me the zinger, "Do you care if you spend Christmas away from your family?" "Nah," I said, pretending not to care. Being seventeen, I didn't want to appear "uncool," and doing most anything with your family at that age was viewed as uncool. Life was all about exerting independence. It would be the first time in my life that I would be away from home for the holidays and the prospect made me a bit unsettled. Christmas had always been a fun family affair, although the season's commercialism was increasingly turning me off. Perhaps I needed a change of venue.

From doing a paper route, I had saved enough money to buy a basic backpack and a down sleeping bag from the local Army-Navy store. Boots were a different matter. The only pair I could afford were artificial leather work boots from Kmart. The material appeared to be a pliable plastic. Eric frowned when he saw them, but agreed that the soles had good tread for gripping slippery rock faces. We set out on our journey north in Eric's pickup truck. Conditions became increasingly wintry around Atlanta, and by the time we pulled into the parking lot at Neel's Gap, our surroundings were a mountain wonderland of snow. From inside the warm truck looking out, it was an inviting sight for two Floridians.

That SAVED CHRISTMAS



The author - now a more seasoned hiker - on the A.T. in 2010; Inset: the novice breaking in his not-so-sturdy hiking boots in 1974.



Hiking the A.T. in winter 1974.



Doug. A.T. thru-hike. Maine. 1975.



Eric Herminghausen on A.T. in Georgia. winter 1974.

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We opened the truck doors. Icy wind gripped us. We hurriedly slipped on coats, wool caps and gloves. "My God it's cold," I exclaimed, stating the obvious. From the back of the pick-up, we lifted our frightfully heavy backpacks, filled with enough macaroni, instant oatmeal, gorp, and Spam to feed us for a week. I suppressed a groan as I hoisted my pack onto my shoulders. Did Daniel Boone carry so much gear? We quickly set out on the storied Appalachian Trail with the expectation that vigorous exercise would soon warm us up.

Exhilaration filled me for the first mile as we crunched through newly fallen snow, steadily climbing. During the second mile, I felt I was getting a blister, and by the third mile, I was not only getting one blister, but two. Each mile seemed like another day in the "Twelve Days of Christmas," but the surprise "gifts" were not all pleasant ones. By the fifth mile, we were slipping down our first steep descent in icy conditions. This was followed by a tortuously steep climb up Wildcat Mountain on the other side of a gap. Each series of steps elicited gasps for air. I didn't realize you could sweat so much in freezing temperatures, but rest stops were brief because to halt movement meant to invite in the cold. I was feeling like a pack mule in Antarctica.

After seven-plus miles, I nearly crawled into our first lean-to style shelter and overnight stop. Only the day's spectacular scenery, vistas easily seen through leafless forests, made the effort worth it. The cascading streams were especially noteworthy. They were a series of sparkling multi-layered icicles. We ate macaroni and spam while wrapped in our sleeping bags and I slept that night with my red nose barely poking out of my mummy style bag. I thought Floridians mostly came to the mountains to escape summer heat. It was then that I asked myself: what did this have to do with preparing for our summer trip on the A.T.? We might hit some cold weather near the end of the journey, but by then we should be thoroughly broken in.

By Day Three, I was becoming painfully aware of muscles I didn't know existed. To top it off, I noticed that a tear had begun to form on the top of my right boot near where the shoelaces began. I put on that miracle of inventions — duct tape. By the next day,

however, the tear had grown to three inches and the duct tape was clearly not working. Cold and moisture from snow was seeping in, soaking my sock. Christmas with my family was looking better with each step — warmth, good food, gifts, laughter, games, warmth, good food. On the morning of the fifth day, Christmas Eve, my right boot completely tore in half. I had to duct tape a plastic bag over my foot to keep it from freezing. It was then that I turned to Eric with an obvious conclusion, "I won't make it over another mountain." I let out an exaggerated sigh. Eric glanced at my foot and frowned. "There's a highway at the next gap," he said begrudgingly. "We can hitch back to the truck from there."

For the next mile or more, we descended a steep slope through ice, snow, and freezing rain. I lost nearly all feeling in my right foot, which was a good thing given the sharp rocks. The paved highway and all that it represented was an early Christmas present. Because it was Christmas Eve, and perhaps due to our pitiful appearance — how many hitchhikers do you see with a plastic bag over their foot — we easily caught rides back to Neel's Gap and Eric's truck. We made it to my house that evening, much to my family's delight. Eric dropped me off and continued on towards his home in central Florida. He suddenly didn't want to miss Christmas with his family either. And we owed it all to my plastic work boots.

That summer, Eric and I flew up to Maine just days after we graduated from high school. There was still snow atop Katahdin, although nowhere near what we had seen the December before. Initially, our biggest challenge was swarms of biting black flies. During the ensuing months, we braved monsoon-like rains, heat waves, blisters, and homesickness. Eric and I separated in Vermont due to my yearning to strike out on my own, but we each completed the Trail soon after the first snows began to fall in north Georgia. I was home by Thanksgiving. ♣

Doug Alderson is the author of several books: www.dougalderson.net